



Media Reality ✓ Check

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Networks Claimed “Many Catholics” Opposed “Ultraconservative” Ratzinger, “God’s Rottweiler”

Ignoring the Pro-Pope Polls of Catholics

While ABC and *The Washington Post* devoted their full attention to their loaded poll finding that 66 percent of Americans didn’t want a change in Senate filibuster rules (even though the poll question avoided the word “filibuster”), they downplayed numbers from the same survey that 81 percent of U.S. Catholics approve of the selection of Pope Benedict XVI.

The *Post* put its pro-Pope poll results on A11 on Tuesday, while their filibuster poll was at the top of Page One. While ABC’s *World News Tonight* highlighted the filibuster poll Monday, anchor Charles Gibson then turned to the Pope for a brief report on his thoughts about his election, but mentioned nothing about the positive papal poll. ABC’s *Good Morning America* noted the pro-Pope number in passing on Monday morning.

The pro-Pope results also weren’t picked up at the other networks, although NBC’s Katie Couric used other ABC-*Post* poll numbers on Tuesday’s *Today* about how religious views should inform political decisions.

ABC’s poll finding satisfaction with the selection of Pope Benedict doesn’t exactly match ABC’s reaction minutes after the Pope’s election on April 19. ABC reporter Cokie Roberts quickly complained it was an “extremely controversial choice,” and an ABC producer in Germany suggested the new pontiff wouldn’t overcome his image of “keeping the Church in the Middle Ages.”

A persistent network storyline before, during, and after the conclave was how a broad majority of American Catholics were going to be distraught by another conservative Pope. “Many Catholics found no reason to celebrate,” warned CBS reporter John Roberts. Liberals may be “many” and still be in the distinct minority, but that’s not the impression you’d get from TV news.

In fact, the liberal networks tried hard to lobby the opinions of American Catholics that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was a scary “ultraconservative,” an “extreme

conservative,” and even “God’s Rottweiler.” The media were especially fond of this label, which suggests a frightening German dog with a reputation for viciousness.

Reflecting the trend in TV coverage, all three national news magazines carried the “Rottweiler” label this week, in five different stories. Some reporters even suggested the nasty-doggy nickname was aged like a fine wine. CNN reporter Chris Burns claimed last week that Cardinal Ratzinger was “long dubbed God’s Rottweiler.”

But a Nexis search for “God’s Rottweiler” quickly reveals that the phrase didn’t show up in the media’s database until April 4, two days after Pope John Paul died. It began in an Australian newspaper, then was regurgitated by Agence France-Presse on April 10, and made the *New York Daily News* on April 15. It caught on like wildfire with a media who wanted the Pope to sound like a German movie villain.

While some reporters suggested it was an old Vatican nickname, the anti-Ratzinger zinger “God’s Rottweiler” didn’t show up in the media’s database until April 4, two days after Pope John Paul died. It caught on like wildfire with a media who wanted the Pope to sound like a German movie villain.

Did reporters do any research into whether this nickname came from inside the church, as they often implied, or was it created inside a newsroom? (The *Daily News* claimed it was “gleefully” coined by an anti-Ratzinger Italian cardinal.) The nickname was “too good to check.”

Not every religious leader gets the “Rottweiler” treatment. In 64 network stories about the “landmark” ascension of gay Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson in 2003, Robinson was spared any nasty personal nicknames. He was never even described as “liberal” or “radical,” and reporters couldn’t manage to use the word “activist” to describe him. The networks do not try to convince people that every religious leader is a threatening extremist. That kind of negative coverage is reserved for conservatives. — *Tim Graham*

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